

If the name Edgar Guest doesn't immediately ring familiar, you are not alone. He was Michigan's last State Poet Laureate, appointed in 1952. Even among the most knowledgeable of Michigan's thousands of poets, few know of his accomplishment. Fifty-three years is a long time to perpetuate a memory. State Senate Bill 181 would restore that appointment to our great State of Michigan and perhaps give Edgar's proud name some well-deserved respect.

In recent discussions regarding Bill 181, a re-occurring question surfaces: "Why do we need a State Poet Laureate?" Aside from the fact that Michigan is one of only eleven states without such an appointment, the cultural benefits can be easily measured if one takes the time to look about both Michigan Peninsulas.

In mid-May for example, Ludington, Michigan hosts its annual weekend of poetry and workshops. Twenty-one remarkable Michigan poets will gather on the shores of Lake Michigan for the Ludington Poetry Festival and will be joined by many hundreds of appreciative devotees. Not only does Ludington identify itself as a cultural Mecca within our state, it's hotels and restaurants greatly benefit from the experience. The attendance of a State Poet Laureate would signify an official recognition by the State, adding even more prestige to this event.

Or consider the Wayne County Council for Arts, History, & Humanities Contest. A collaboration of poetry, art and music comes together in the Metro Detroit area this fall to celebrate a unique event in which poets, artists and musicians of all ages and races share their creative energy to write poems and music inspired by the works of visual artists. A Poet Laureate would represent our State in this culturally diverse event, bringing a higher level of esteem to this deserving competition.

But perhaps the most important benefit of a Poet Laureate is to the children of Michigan. In 2005, the Poetry Society of Michigan sponsored a children's poetry contest in which winning poems were automatically qualified for the Manningham Student Trust Competition, a national level event. From the village of Negaunee, in Michigan's upper peninsula, over one hundred student poems were entered, as was the case from students in the Grand Rapids area.

Children write amazing poems. Their poetry sparkles with a freshness and simplicity that only young minds are able to tap into. Children love poetry because they do not need to be born with an artist's eye, be a natural musician or throw a ninety-eight mile an hour fastball to participate in the art form. All they must do is be well skilled in writing fundamentals, such as grammar, spelling and vocabulary. An art form that promotes the basics of reading and writing is a win-win situation for Michigan education. It is the children who will look upon a visit from the State Poet Laureate as an inspiring, memorable event in their young lives.

The examples noted here are merely the tip of the poetic ice burg in Michigan. There are similar festivals and school systems all across the state that will benefit from the appointment of a Poet Laureate. So the next time someone asks, "Why?" tell them about Ludington and Negaunee...

Senate Bill 181 is non-partisan legislation that can provide ongoing guidance and motivation to poets and poetry fans in Michigan. Let's all work to make it a reality.